

VZCZCXRO4559
OO RUEHDBU RUEHPW
DE RUEHBUL #1394/01 1140522
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 240522Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7689
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 3998
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 3598

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KABUL 001394

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/FO DAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
NSC FOR AHARRIMAN
OSD FOR SHIVERS
CENTCOM FOR CG CFC-A. CG CJTF-82 POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/24/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR AF

SUBJECT: THE NATIONAL FRONT: POLITICAL FLAME OR SPUTTERING CANDLE?

REF: KABUL 001198

Classified By: DCM Richard Norland for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Officially launched with great fanfare on April 3, the United Front may already be losing momentum as a political movement. Several Afghan VIPs who were reputedly members have turned out to not be officially in the group after all, although they may just be bending with the wind and waiting to see what happens with the Front over time. The President's negative reaction to the Front's formation is seen by many as over-emotional, but Afghan cynics point out that despite its VIP composition and valid questions, the Front has a weak foundation and will soon diminish in importance. End summary.

No Longer Quite a Who's Who of Power Brokers

¶2. (C) In the initial flurry of media reaction to the Front's formation, the names of VP Massoud and VP Khalili, as well as Wolesi Jirga Deputy Speaker Aref Noorzai were mentioned as members. This has proven to not be the case, and whatever their true feelings, none of the three have taken membership. Ex-Communist leader and now Member of Parliament Gulabzoy is allegedly having second thoughts about staying in the Front, and the former king, Zahir Shah, has announced that his grandson, Mustapha Zahir, does not represent the family in any way as a member. (Note: In a conversation with members of the Karzai family about the ex-King's public announcement, Poloff was told that Zahir Shah was feeling much better and had himself signed the letter discrediting his grandson; however, in a conversation with members of the Qanooni family, Poloff was told that the ex-King was still semi-comatose on his deathbed, and that Dr. Rasoul from the NSC had simply written and issued the announcement himself. End note.) Although approached by the Front to take part, ex-FonMin Abdullah, MP Professor Sayaf and Shi'ite MP Muhaqqeq have also refrained so far from accepting membership.

The National Front's Version of Events

¶3. (C) On 5 April, Poloff met at Jamiat political party headquarters with National Front council member Mohammed Sediq Chakeri (who is also Political Advisor to ex-President Rabbani, newly selected as head of the National Front). Chakeri claimed that the Front was formed to address the questions of joblessness, corruption, poor health conditions and a worsening security situation in Afghanistan, problems that the Karzai Administration had been unable to handle. He stressed that the Front was not opposed to the presence of NATO and Coalition forces in Afghanistan, reminding Poloff that the Front's leadership had opened up Northern Afghanistan to American forces and fully cooperated with them to help drive the Taliban out. This cooperation would continue. He added that the Front members were concerned over the number of Coalition forces who were dying in Afghanistan, and that measures had to be taken to lighten the Coalition sacrifices. This included popular election of governors, a move he believed would enhance security in the provinces. He added that a federal system might be the best solution for Afghanistan's needs, but that the time for this step was not ripe yet. The Front wanted to balance Cabinet and other high government posts on an ethnic basis, and "liberal" Taliban would be invited to join the government. The Front would nominate a Presidential candidate in the 2009 election, but it would not be Karzai.

¶4. (C) Chakeri described an emotional meeting that he,

KABUL 00001394 002 OF 004

Mustapha Zahir and ex-DefMin Marshall Fahim had attended with President Karzai, claiming that Karzai told Mustapha Zahir (who has presidential ambitions) that only he (Karzai) was supported by the world community as President of Afghanistan, and asking him why he was associating himself with war criminals. Mustapha Zahir responded that these men were Karzai's own ministers. The President then threatened the group that if the National Front continued, he himself would go to Kandahar and deal directly with Gulbeddin Hekmetyar and the Taliban (as his allies). According to Chakeri, claims that only he is supported by the USG and the international community is a frequent Karzai refrain when dealing with potential rivals for the presidency.

¶5. (C) In a follow-up meeting at his residence on 10 April with Sayed Mustapha Kazemi, the National Front Spokesman (who was Minister of Commerce in the Interim government, represents Parwan as an MP and is Chairman of the Wolesi Jirga's Committee on the Economy), Poloff was told that the Front wants to work within Afghan law, but that challenges to Afghanistan have been growing day by day. Kazemi repeated Chakeri's citations of corruption and worsening security, but added the poppy problem and terrorism to the list of problems Karzai is accused of being unable to handle. Kazemi believed that the government had created many of its own difficulties, and that Karzai was confusing his personal problems with national policy, giving the example of how Karzai would get angry at another country (e.g., Pakistan) and then express his emotion in policy terms. This was dangerous for Afghanistan's interests and increased regional tensions. Kazemi added that the Afghan people had lost hope, and that today's gap between the people and the government - a gap that had not existed even 3 years ago - was the result. As a result, more and more people were now leaving Afghanistan to return to Pakistan and Iran, ethnic pressures were growing and communities wanted to re-arm, and capital investment in Afghanistan was dropping. He claimed that blame was being put on the international community for much of this, and if these conditions persisted, eventually the Europeans would make excuses and depart Afghanistan, the USA would find itself alone in Afghanistan, and the government would blame everyone

else but itself.

¶ 16. (C) Kazemi said the Front's message that "we are one people" would force the Taliban to pull back, and criticism of the Front's membership as "jihadi" vs. non-jihadi only served to give the Taliban increased importance. The Front would also show that technocrats had a real place in Afghanistan. Inclusion of ex-Communist era Minister of the Interior Gulabzoy (now an MP from Khost) and ex-Communist era Military Commander of South and Southwest Afghanistan Olumi (now representing Kandahar and serving as Chief of the Defense Committee in the Wolesi Jirga) broadened the Front's base and added expertise, because "it's a fact that most of the professional people in Afghanistan were trained in the Communist era".

¶ 17. (C) Turning to the international presence in Afghanistan, Kazemi said that the Front knew that Afghanistan depended on foreign assistance, but the presence of the international forces and community in Afghanistan should be lawful and legalized. The Front would also work within the law to look to a future Parliamentary/Prime Ministerial form of government, look at voting procedures, and seek to have a system of elected governors in the provinces.

¶ 18. (C) Kazemi emphasized that the National Front was designed to be united and broad-based, and added that Karzai should have congratulated the group for its formation rather than attacking it. He commented that Karzai himself was "imprisoned in a museum", and that the Front's members had been trying to get Karzai to act responsibly for four years without success. Karzai's claims that there were "foreign hands" (e.g. Russia, Pakistan and Iran) behind the National Front were baseless.

KABUL 00001394 003 OF 004

Reaction to the National Front

¶ 19. (C) Formation of the National Front is very much the political topic du jour in Kabul. Many Afghans see the Front as little more than another effort by former jihad leaders to unite against the possibility of prosecution for alleged human rights abuses, one more step in self defense following on the Amnesty Bill. A leader of the Nakhsabandi Sufi mystics told Poloff that the leaders of the Front had joined together because they were simply afraid of possible repercussions for their pasts, and his opinion was echoed in comments from several MPs. The claim of the "foreign hand" has been repeated to Poloff by Palace supporters and members of the Karzai family, who at the same time are increasingly strident that "there is no alternative to President Karzai". Critics also note that fear is the only glue holding the Front together, and that because the Front's leaders have such a history of rivalry and irreconcilable personal agendas, it is unlikely the Front will be able to stick together very long.

The Times, They Are A' Changing

¶ 110. (C) Given its strong jihad-oriented leadership, the National Front faces problems that time can only exacerbate. The era on which the jihadis base their legitimacy ended with the departure of the Soviets in 1989, and they seldom refer to the Civil War excesses and conflict to which they contributed, and which resulted in the Taliban accession to power. Pure demographics will play a powerful role in the next election. The voting age in Afghanistan is 18, which means that a very significant percentage of the electorate in the upcoming 2009 election would not even have been born during the jihad era. For this generation the famous names of that period are simply footnotes in the history books with little resonance for the country's future. In a meeting last

week at a local high school which was founded in 2002, for example, Poloff was told by the school director that in the 2009 election more than 8,000 of his past and present students who had been under-age in the last presidential election would be eligible to vote, and they are not impressed with the old political names. Many new voters would only have vague memories (if any at all) of the Civil War period, and even the Taliban era - which ended in 2001, is fading as a reference point. The young voters will look for candidates who can produce jobs, educational opportunities, security and public services, none of which can be ascribed to the old jihad leaders.

The Ex-King's Grandson: Who?

¶11. (C) The National Front's show-piecing of Mustapha Zahir, the dying ex-King's grandson, is also an anomaly. While his name might attract some traditional Pashtun support away from Karzai, his inclusion in the Front has also apparently angered the President because he feels personally betrayed. However, the ex-King's family carries no sway at all with the country's Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara or Turkoman population, and even many Pashtuns want to see the royal legacy buried forever with the King. The King was overthrown in 1973, and for younger voters, his family name evokes no sense of nostalgia. It is almost impossible to point to any positive contribution the ex-King's family has made to post-2001 Afghanistan, and for many older people, there is a lingering recollection of ineptitude, corruption and abuse associated with the once royal family. Afghan cynics note Mustapha Zahir's open ambition to be president, but also cite his family's record of selling off the royal properties they received back from Karzai and their sending the money abroad. Their assumption is that Mustapha Zahir is a pawn who will be discarded by the National Front leadership as soon as his

KABUL 00001394 004 OF 004

symbolic usefulness is ended.

Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?

¶12. (C) While still powerful, the decreasing prestige and strength of the jihad-era leaders is evident in today's Kabul. Many have made the transition into Parliament or the business world, but assassinations, infighting, weariness, assaults by human rights groups, open criticism in the media, poor health and the reality of the aging process have all placed their toll on this once very powerful group. Prior to the jihad leaders' convocation of a public rally in February to show support for a general amnesty, for example, Poloff was told by today's National Front activist Chakeri that there would be as many as 200,000 participants. The reality a few days later was less than one tenth of that figure.

¶13. (C) Meetings with jihad-era figures today are in sharp contrast with what Emboffs remember from 2002, when warlords and commanders surrounded themselves with large entourages of fierce looking armed guards and eager staff aides. In their residences today, these same leaders have a far more muted presence, with ambitious staff aides gone to greener pastures and the guards lesser in number and often looking down at the heels. Several former such aides have told Poloff that they left their warlord bosses because they saw no future in their positions and were afraid to continue their association with them. Even Rabbani's once powerful Jamiat Party headquarters is a shabby, dirty structure in desperate need of repainting and renovation. No telephones ring, there are no young staffers in evidence and the guard force is a motley and disheveled crew. And today's conversations with the old leaders have an increasingly perceptible Willy Loman/Blanche DuBois quality that focuses far more on past glory than realistic plans for Afghanistan's future.

The Significance of the National Front

¶14. (C) If it survives as a viable political movement and attracts (unlikely) a younger, energetic following despite its critics, the National Front might indeed force Karzai to take a hard look at the problems of corruption, security, illegal narcotics, capital investment and joblessness that the Front has publicized. These are valid concerns for all Afghans, and the people raising these issues, all of whom have present or past high position, have the right to publicly express their opinions and offer recommendations. The question of the foreign presence in Afghanistan is a real one for the Afghan people, and the concept of elected governors and the future form of government should be open to debate as well. If Karzai continues to simply react to the National Front with emotion and panic, and to try to discredit the group with claims of a hidden foreign hand, he will only force his opposition (and many people are opposed to Karzai, though polls still show a solid majority in favor) to unite against him with other, perhaps more popular political organizations.

WOOD